

Understanding Contemporary Developments in Work, Employment and Employment Relations: Some Reflections

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1. Introduction

It is important that policy interventions formulated by professionals in the fields of careers education and guidance are informed by accurate knowledge of contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations. Popularised by writers such as Charles Handy and Charles Leadbeater, the notion that there has been transformation in the world of work, associated with the rise of a 'new economy', has attracted widespread attention and also some considerable sympathy, particularly among policy makers. Although there is a considerable amount of diversity in their approaches and perspectives, transformational accounts tend to be characterised by a number of distinctive features. First, there is often a presumption that conventional jobs, and traditional bureaucratic careers, are being displaced by the growth of so-called 'portfolio' working arrangements, featuring self-employed workers engaged on temporary projects who benefit from the greater control they are able to exercise over their own working lives (Handy 1994; Leadbeater 1999). Second, it is sometimes held that occupational change, in particular the growth of professional and managerial work, is associated with a shift towards more highly skilled and intrinsically rewarding 'knowledge' work (Leadbeater, 1999). Third, it is also asserted that conventional employment patterns, full-time permanent jobs in particular, are being displaced by more flexible arrangements, most notably part-time and temporary working (Beck, 2000). A fourth aspect of the 'transformational' thesis is the notion that globalisation leaves the governments of nation-states unable to intervene and regulate their labour markets (Gray, 1998).

The principal aim of these reflections, though, is to critically assess some of the key assumptions that inform transformational perspectives. Based on up-to-date quantitative and qualitative research evidence, this paper focuses on four important, but often neglected, aspects of contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations: the complex and incremental nature of change; the relevance of power and managerial attempts to exercise control; the role of political ideology; and the experiences and activities of workers.

2. The complex and incremental nature of change

One of the most significant features of transformational accounts of workplace change is the emphasis that is placed on self-employment as a means of organising work. However, after a marked period of growth during the 1980s, over the last fifteen years the number of self-employed in Britain has been rather stable, at around three and a half million people (Lindsay and Macaulay, 2004). The notion of an emergent 'new economy' based on increasing numbers of 'portfolio' workers appears misplaced (Nolan and Slater, 2003).

Moreover, the assumption that technological change at work, associated with the development of an information-based knowledge, or 'new', economy, has been responsible for a substantial increase in the number of professional and managerial jobs, involving 'knowledge work', is also rather exaggerated. For one thing, much so-called 'knowledge work' is of a rather routine and mundane nature – see Poynter's (2000) case studies of organisational change in financial services for a relevant example. Moreover, there is evidence that occupational change has been characterised by an increase in the proportion of care assistants and security operatives, as well as software engineers and the like. It would appear that the 'traditional' labour force, largely comprising white-collar staff in routine administrative jobs, dominates employment in Britain, notwithstanding the growth of professional and managerial positions (Nolan and Wood, 2003; Nolan and Slater, 2003).

Following on from this, it is sometimes assumed that technological change at work and the utilisation of information technology in particular, is associated with an increase in skill levels. Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with measuring skill (Bradley et al., 2000), there is some evidence of upskilling in Britain (Gallie et al., 1998). Felstead et al. (2004, p. 166) report evidence of 'a considerable upward movement in the complexity of jobs carried out in Britain', particularly in respect of computing skills. Yet there remains a concern that insufficient demand from employers for skills impedes the emergence of a high skill economy (Grugulis et al., 2004). Moreover, technological innovation appears to be strongly associated with work intensification in Britain (Green, 2004).

One of the most pronounced assumptions about the way in which workplaces are changing concerns the assumption that in search of efficiency savings organisations have, helped by technological changes, stripped out layers to such an extent that traditional bureaucratic careers have been rendered obsolete. Such traditional careers were often highly gendered, in as much as they were largely restricted to men. Yet recent research data indicate the presence of a trend towards 'grade expansion, rather than delayering' (White *et al.*, 2004, p. 61). It appears that the fashion for reducing the number of job grades, and for stripping out organisational levels in a process of delayering, did not last long since in many organisations bureaucratic career paths seem to be enjoying a revival.

It is sometimes assumed that the labour market in Britain is increasingly dominated by flexible, or so-called 'non-standard', employment arrangements, such as part-time and temporary work. Yet it is important to emphasise the gradual, incremental basis of such change (Robinson, 1999). Since the mid-1980s there has been a steady growth in the number of part-time employees in Britain, from about 4.5 million to 6.5 million. The 1990s saw a modest increase in the number of temporary employees, to a peak of 1.85 million in 1997. Since then, though, the number of temporary employees has declined to around 1.5 million. White *et al.* (2004) highlight the ubiquity of flexible labour in British workplaces; the presence of part-time and/or temporary workers has become the norm. However, the incidence within workplaces appears to have reached its limit.

3. Power, control and the management of labour

Having outlined the complex and incremental nature of change in work, employment and employment relations, a further concern of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of management's attempts to use its power to effect control at work. Transformational accounts of change tend to be informed by a unitary ideology; they assume that work organisations are characterised by a harmony of interests. Concepts such as power and control are notable by their absence. Indeed it is sometimes assumed that the growth of knowledge work, and the emergence of a new economy, renders them obsolete (see Leadbeater, 1999). Yet one of the most pronounced trends in contemporary work organisations is the attempt by managers to exercise greater control over their workforces. It can be seen, for example, in the efforts expended to resist unionisation. While a new statutory union recognition procedure introduced by the Labour government in 2000 has stimulated hundreds of new union recognition agreements, there is evidence of the determination of some firms to exclude trade unions (Oxenbridge *et al.*, 2003). Even where unions have been able to maintain a presence, it has often been achieved only by eschewing confrontational tactics through

the explicit acceptance of a co-operative 'partnership' approach with an employer (Kelly, 2004).

While some writers have made much of the potential for new technology to liberate workers, and generate more meaningful and skilled jobs, there is plenty of evidence that information technology, and the growing use of sophisticated performance management techniques, are used as part of an attempt to extend managerial control at work, since they permit greater monitoring and surveillance (Gallie *et al.*, 1998; White *et al.* 2004). Unsurprisingly, then, there is evidence of a decline in the extent of the task discretion enjoyed by workers (Felstead *et al.*, 2004).

What about empowerment initiatives? Have they allowed workers more influence over the way in which their work tasks are undertaken? Research studies point to the modesty of most empowerment initiatives; see Lashley's (2000) study of TGI Fridays for example. Waiting staff were encouraged to personalise the way in which they interacted with customers. Yet their efforts to do so were constrained by corporate rules governing the way in which services should be delivered, such as waiting times between courses for example. There is evidence that where workers are given greater scope for participation in respect of their work tasks, it is often accompanied by stricter managerial control over discipline and standards of performance (Edwards *et al.* 1998). Moreover, the resilience of managerial discipline in general is a prominent feature of contemporary work organisations (Edwards, 2000).

One prominent aspect of workplace change in contemporary Britain concerns the increasing incidence of practices associated with what White *et al.* (2004) term 'intelligent flexibility'; work arrangements that enable workers to become involved in a greater variety of tasks or extend the scope of their participation, through teamworking initiatives for example. According to the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey, teamworking is present in 72 per cent of workplaces (Kersley *et al.*, 2005). Yet how significant is such a development? In the service sector, for example, teams are generally no more than 'administrative work groups of individual workers under the jurisdiction of one supervisor' (Korczyński, 2002, p. 134). Moreover, there is some evidence that teamworking initiatives can be used by managers to challenge organised labour rather than as a genuine attempt to extend participation (Danford, 1998). Managers, then, often promote flexibility as a way of extending their own control. This was evident in the case studies of public and private sector organisations undertaken by Beynon *et al.* (2002). The researchers found that flexibility was associated with the erosion of hitherto established workplace norms and practices, in a way that rendered the workforce more 'disposable'. Rather than extending workers' participation, flexibility represents a commodification of their labour.

4. Political ideology and labour market regulation

Not only does any attempt to understand contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations need to be aware of the relevance of management's attempts to use their power to extend control at work, but it also has to consider the significance of political choices. One of the main features of transformational accounts is the often implicit assumption that change is driven solely by economic and technological imperatives, to such an extent that matters affecting the world of work are beyond the scope of political interventions. This is exemplified by the proposition that globalisation, given that it is a process driven by, and operating to the benefit of, increasingly mobile multinational companies whose location decisions are governed by the search for competitiveness and flexibility, undermines the degree to which nation-states are able to regulate their own labour markets and employment systems (see Gray, 1998). Yet it seems clear that governments exaggerate the extent of their helplessness in the face of the supposedly unstoppable juggernaut of globalisation as a means of legitimising neo-liberal, deregulatory policies (Hirst and Thompson, 1999).

In Britain, for example, Labour's employment policy has been informed by a neo-liberal assumption that de-regulated, flexible labour markets and weak trade unions are the main source of enhanced economic competitiveness (Smith and Morton, 2001). Nevertheless, largely because of pressure from unions, campaign groups and also its own activists, Labour has increased the degree of labour market regulation in Britain. Since the late 1990s new laws have, among other things, introduced a National Minimum Wage, established a new statutory recognition procedure for trade unions, extended the scope of anti-discrimination legislation, enhanced maternity leave, and brought in paternity leave. Much of this legislative programme was enacted in a way that was designed to make it amenable to employers; European Union directives, for example, have often been implemented in a 'minimalist' way, with the aim of diluting their effects (McKay, 2001; Smith and Morton, 2001). Nevertheless, the fact of its existence gives the lie to the proposition that globalisation renders political intervention obsolete; Labour's reluctance to enact more rigorous labour market regulation reflects its obedience to the principles of neo-liberalism, not an inability to intervene.

5. The experiences and activities of workers

Finally, an adequate analysis of change in work, employment and employment relations needs to examine, and take into account, the experiences of workers themselves. Transformational accounts either rely on the anecdotal and unrepresentative experiences of isolated individuals, or on managerial perspectives. Yet there is a wealth of evidence suggesting that change is informed

by the experiences and activities of workers. This is well illustrated with reference to the concepts of job security and insecurity. Much has been written about the growing climate of job insecurity (see Elliot and Atkinson, 1998; Sennett, 1998), something that is sometimes associated with the presence of flexible employment arrangements (Conley, 2002). Yet it is important to treat the concept of job insecurity in a more sophisticated way, being something that is not just a product of particular employment configurations, but which incorporates the subjective feelings of employees, particularly the prospect of losing their jobs, and the consequences for their livelihoods, in a neo-liberal political context (Doogan, 2001; Heery and Salmon, 2000). Charles *et al.* (2005) use data from a study of three retail stores to demonstrate the important way in which gender influences workers' perceptions of job insecurity, particularly in respect of the availability of alternative employment opportunities. Whereas men were largely concerned with maintaining their existing terms and conditions, women tended to regard the provision of working arrangements that enabled them to uphold their caring responsibilities as being more important.

A proper analysis of contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations must also appreciate that workers, often collectively, influence change. It is often suggested that globalisation is leading to a 'race to the bottom' in respect of labour standards as multinational companies use the power that comes from their ability to make investment decisions to insist that developing countries, and their workers, accept lower wages, poorer working conditions and limited or no union organisation (Tsogas, 2001). Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that workers in such situations do not passively accept the conditions under which they labour, but play an active role in agitating for better employment rights. The concept of a 'race to the bottom', then, fails to capture the numerous ways in which workers in developing countries challenge their employers and contest their employment relationships (Silver, 2003). In order to develop an appropriate understanding of the implications of globalisation for work, employment and employment relations, the experiences and activities of workers, and of organised labour, must also be taken into account.

6. Concluding thoughts

It is important not to understate the significance of change in work, employment and employment relations since the 1980s: the diminution of trade unionism and collective bargaining coverage, for example (Millward, *et al.* 2000), and the more extensive use of information technology at work (White *et al.*, 2004), being particularly notable developments. The most recent Workplace Employment Relations Survey, undertaken in 2004 and 2005, among other things points to the increasing incidence of employee involvement initiatives and 'family-friendly' practices (Kersley *et al.* 2005). The

large extent to which change in work, employment and employment relations is complex and incremental, though, must be recognised: something that is particularly apparent from trends in flexible employment. There are also important areas of continuity, most notably the concern of managers with extending their control in the workplace. What has changed, though, is that information technology and new performance management techniques have enhanced the capacity of managers to exercise control. Contemporary work, employment and employment relations are, then, characterised by a complex pattern of continuity and change. It is also strongly influenced by political choices. While governments may claim that global pressures leave them unable to regulate labour markets, their interventions, or lack of them, are generally a function of political ideology. Finally, it is imperative that analyses of developments in work, employment and employment relations pay appropriate regard to the experiences and activities of workers. Organised labour may well be in a weak state in Britain, but its influence on a global scale should not be downplayed.

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